DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 087 070 CS 500 583

AUTHOR Saboe, Mary E.
TITLE "Gestus" and the Performance of Prose Fiction.
PUB DATE May 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Doctoral Honors Seminar in Interpretation "The Phenomenon of Performance" (1st, Northwestern University, School of Speech, May 9-11, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Choral Speaking; Communication (Thought Transfer); Creative Dramatics; Drama; Fiction; *Interpretive Reading; *Literature Appreciation; Oral Communication; *Oral Expression; Prose; *Readers Theater; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Brecht (Bertolt); Gestus

ABSTRACT

Three performance problems encountered in storytelling are: subordinating the perspective of individual characters to that of the storyteller; the role of the audience; and the undefined boundary between reader and audience. The concept of "Gestus" as espoused in the dramatic theory of Bertolt Brecht offers an approach to the performance of imaginative literature singularly structured to solve these three performance problems. Crucial to Brecht's gestic approach to performance is his belief that an understanding of the story as a whole must precede specific character analysis, that an intelligent, critically involved audience is indispensable to good performance, and that literal representations of action are not the only means, or even the best means, of communicating the gestic impulse to the audience. (LL)

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 087070

SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

THE PHENOMENON OF PERFORMANCE

Papers presented at the first

DOCTORAL HONORS SEMINAR

IN

INTERPRETATION

The School of Speech
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

May 9-11, 1973

CS 500 683

Table of Contents

Foreword iii

A Theory of Meaning for the Performance of Literature
by Kristina Minister (Northwestern University) 1

Suggestion in Oral Performance: A Shadow of An Image
by James A. Pearse (University of Arizona) 12

Oral Interpretation Performance as A Self-Referencing Process
by Pamela M. Plax (University of Southern California) 23

The Performance of Southern Myth in Absalom, Absalom! by
William Faulkner
by Voiza O. Arnold (University of Illinois) 34

A Rhetorical Analysis of Denise Levertov's "From a Notebook:
October '68--May '69"
by Jean Phillips (University of Houston) 43

Indeterminacy and Dissonance: An Approach to Violence in the
Writings of Joyce Carol Oates
by Bonnie Mesinger (Wayne State University) 51

Losing Battles: The Tests of Endurance
by Phillis Rienstra (University of Texas at Austin) 60

Performing the Narrators in Jean Stafford's "The Hope Chest"
by Sister JoAnn Niehaus (Louisiana State University) 72

Gestus and the Performance of Prose Fiction
by Mary E. Saboe (University of Minnesota) 80

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mary E. Saboe

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Gestus and the Performance of Prose Fiction

by

Mary E. Saboe
University of Minnesota

> What makes [aesthetic theories]--these honorific definitions--so supremely valuable is not their disguised linguistic recommendations; rather it is the debates over the reasons for changing the criteria of the concept of art which are built into the definitions. In each of the great theories of art, whether correctly understood as honorific definitions or incorrectly accepted as real definitions, what is of the utmost importance are the reasons proffered in the argument for the respective theory, that is, the reasons given for the chosen or preferred criterion of excellence and evaluation. It is this perennial debate over these criteria of evaluation which makes the history of aesthetic theory the important study it is.1
>
> Morris Weitz
> "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics"

The role of storyteller is supported by an ancient and revered tradition. Even before the Greek rhapsodes became societal institutions, the storyteller was a central fixture in the fabric of most cultures. In our own culture the role of storyteller may seem precarious, but no less important, than in older, less frenetic times. As Southern writer, Flannery O'Connor, states, "There is a certain embarrassment about being a storyteller in these times when stories are considered not quite as satisfying as statements and statements not quite as satisfying as statistics, but in the long run a people is known not by its statements or its statistics, but by the stories it tells."[2] The telling of the story is the concern not only of the author but also of the oral inter-

preter of fiction. In this paper I propose to isolate three performance problems encountered in the phenomenon of storytelling and to formulate possible solutions to these problems using Bertolt Brecht's concept of Gestus.

By virtue of its narrative qualities, one of the major characteristics of prose fiction is the continual presence of the storyteller, most often a presence quite different from the scenes and characters the storyteller creates. If one believes, as I do, that the storyteller is primary in the phenomenon of prose fiction, then the storyteller must be centrally featured in the performance of that fiction. However, experience has shown me that the storyteller is often placed in a secondary role, or more frequently is removed from the presentation completely. Because of this disregard for the perspective of the primary storyteller, readers are inclined to yield completely to the perspective of one character rather than maintaining a grip on the narrative or authorial perspective which is central to the fiction. This problem becomes particularly apparent in the group endeavor.

The problem of subordinating the perspective of individual characters to that of the storyteller is joined by two other performance problems that, in my opinion, haunt group presentations of prose fiction. The first of these problems grows out of the relationship between the reader and his audience. Too frequently the communication avenues from reader to audience are only passively maintained, rendering the role of audience equally passive. Little significant effort is made on the part of readers to establish clear visual and vocal structures such that the audience can become actively engaged in the imagined action of the story. The intricacies of performance become more important than the audience's

perception, involvement, and understanding of the story. By definition oral interpretation allows more intimate communication between reader and audience than most other dramatic events, a bond that I feel should be cultivated rather than discarded or ignored.

The second performance problem arises out of the often foggy boundary between theatre and oral interpretation. I have noticed in group performances a tendency to progress toward the increasingly literal. Real handerchiefs are dropped; realistically enacted deaths occur. Real ships are sailed and real dinners eaten. Presentations try not just to be theatrical but to be like a stage play. I feel this is a dangerous direction for performance to follow. By yielding to the literal, little attempt is made to explore the symbolic levels of the fiction where the more profound fiber of the story lies. Oral interpretation is by definition symbolic rather than literal. It suggests attitudes, gestures, relationships, and the changes therein, rather than overtly illustrating them with realistic action patterns. To yield to the literal and realistic over the symbolic and suggestive denies the avenue of performance to which oral interpretation is uniquely suited and makes it something less than it is. I feel that answers to these three problems--the problem of audience engagement, the problem of emphasizing the symbolic impulse or a story over its literal manifestations, and the problem of featuring the perspective of the storyteller--should be formulated if the nature of prose fiction and the unique qualities of oral interpretation are to survive in the act of performance.

I contend that the concept of Gestus, as espoused in the dramatic theory of Bertolt Brecht, offers an approach to the performance of imaginative literature singularly structured to solve these three perfor-

mance problems. Brecht confines the gestic impulse to "the realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another."[3] Brecht believed that a theatre based on the principle of Gestus eventually would eclipse realistic theatre based upon the principle of imitation. His purpose was to establish a theatre structured around social rather than psychological conflicts.[4]

Of course Brecht was a committed Marxist; hence, the conflict of attitudes implied in the definition of Gestus is frequently used as a not too subtle metaphor for the class struggle. Used in this sense the concept is too limiting. Gestus is important to the interpretive act because it focuses the attention of the reader on the mental and emotional sources of human action and relationship, rather than upon its physical manifestations. The physical actions are important only as they lead the performer and the audience to the mental or emotional conflicts that prompt them. To be aware of the gestic impulse of a scene or character is to be aware of the structure of attitudes that supports and maintains the progress of the visible surface actions.

Crucial to Brecht's gestic approach to performance is his belief that an understanding of the story as a whole must precede specific character analysis, that an intelligent, critically involved audience is indispensible to good performance, and that literal representations of action are not the only means, or even the best means, to communicate the gestic impulse to that audience.

According to Brecht each scene or unit of a play or narrative operates around a basic gest which in turn informs the social gests of the participating characters. To discover the structure of these gests one must first examine the story as a total unit. Only the more critical,

more knowledgeable perspective of the storyteller has the aesthetic distance necessary to reveal the inconsistencies and ironies in a single character or situation.

> Splitting such material into one gest after another, the actor masters his character by first mastering the "story". It is only after walking all round the entire episode that he can, as it were by a single leap, seize and fix his character, complete with all its individual features. Once he has done his best to let himself be amazed by the inconsistencies in his various attitudes knowing that he will in turn have to make them amaze the audience, then the story as a whole gives him a chance to pull the inconsistencies together.5

The characters themselves are too close, too self-protective, to see the inconsistencies and contradictions in their own actions. But the storyteller sees them, and the reader must suggest them in his performance if a story is to be interpreted with integrity.

Using Brecht's approach to the structuring of an oral interpretation performance the tendency for the reader to yield to the perspective of a single character, rather than the perspective of the storyteller, would be retarded. The reader's empathy with a character would be tempered continually by his knowledge of the primary attitude of the storyteller. For example, in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge", the central character, Julian, is unaware that O'Connor's verbal thrusts are aimed at him. If the reader yields totally to the attitudes of Julian the ironic, contradictory attitude of O'Connor and the core meaning of the story is lost. Brecht's contention that a study of the story and its teller takes precedence over individual character analysis seems to work against this inclination.

Brecht's instructions to his actors support his contention that the gest enacted must not be that of character, but that of storyteller.

> It is an oversimplification if we make the actions fit the character and the character fit the actions; the inconsistencies which are to be found in the actions and characters of real people cannot be shown like that. . . .6

> When he appears on the stage, beside what he actually is doing, he [the actor] will at all essential points discover, specify, imply what he is not doing; that is to say, he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible. . . . Whatever he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does.7

There is an easy retort to Brecht's advice to actors. The action may become cold, abstract, and wooden. But Brecht denies this assertion.

> He [the actor] has just to show the character; or rather, he has to do more than just get into it; this does not mean that if he is playing passionate parts he must himself remain cold. It is only that his feelings must not at bottom be those of the character so that the audience's may not at bottom be those of the character either.8

Brecht is not asking for performance without emotion. He is asking only that the actor/reader not yield to the viewpoint of the character, but instead present the critical attitude of the storyteller.

Using Brecht's approach to the oral performance of prose fiction, the oral interpreter, both singly and in groups, would be more inclined to view the storyteller as the central character of the fiction. Using this technique the audience would receive less of Julian, more of O'Connor.

Brecht also recognizes the importance of actively engaging the audience in the action of the story being performed. He expects his audience to be alert, critical, and engaged intellectually, rather than emotionally, in the proceedings on stage. If a performance is unable to sustain this critical involvement on the part of the audience, if it provides no intellectual meat upon which the audience can feed, it is

considered inferior theatre and bad art. For this reason all gests must be externalized, made perceptible to the minds and senses of the audience.[9] For this reason Brecht feels only social gests, attitudes created by tensions between people, or between persons and their society, are acceptable fare for performance, for they invite critical judgments on the part of the audience and discourage passive empathy with a single character.[10] Admittedly this view is extreme and limiting if one can see Gestus only in terms of a conflict of attitudes between characters. But if one can expand Gestus to include ironic juxtapositions between the attitude of storyteller and the attitude of a character, between the attitude of a character and the attitude keyed in the audience toward that character, the concept becomes provoking, not limiting. How much greater the texture of a performance will be for both reader and audience if the major Gestus of "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is not the lesser conflict between Julian and his mother, but the more significant tension between who Julian thinks he is and who O'Connor reveals him to be. How much more active and vital audience engagement in the performance will be if, rather than identifying with Julian, they are asked to see, through a performance of Julian, the distinctly different attitude of O'Connor?

Finally, through the concept of Gestus Brecht establishes a type of performance vastly different from that seen in conventional theatrical performances. His theatre is not realistic. There are no realistic impulse. Actors do not identify totally with their characters. There is no fourth wall and the audience is not relegated to that perennial keyhole. Brecht's theatre is not illusionistic. The audience is not wooed by overpowering visual illusions. The sets, the action, and the

heroes are not larger than life. Brecht's theatre tries to be narrative rather than imitative, presentational rather than representational, symbolic rather than literal. All three characteristics are central to the identity of oral interpretation. All three are characteristics that oral interpretation must seek to realize in performance. All three are qualities that will be lost if the perspective of the narrator/storyteller is obscured by the perspective of the individual characters, if the audience remains peripheral to the interpretive event, if the oral interpreter forgets that he is a storyteller, not an actor.

It would seem then that a partial guideline for the performance of prose fiction may exist in the annals of dramatic theory. Brecht's concept of Gestus, "the realm of attitudes adopted by the characters toward one another," seems to offer a method through which the narrative quality of a story and the perspective of its teller can be maintained in the act of performance. It supplies techniques that may prevent the reader from succumbing to the tempting possibility of total empathy with one character. It advocates an active role for the audience in the act of performance. It provides a perspective that can clearly establish some boundaries between the traditional stage play and oral interpretation.

Granted the idea of Gestus is too vague to offer anything approaching a complete aesthetic of performance. It leaves a multitude of specific performance problems unanswered, such as the problems and uses of the unison voice, or the possibilities and limits offered by theatrical staging. Its primary accomplishment is to focus the attention of performer and audience on the real heroes of prose fiction. It allows not just characters, but also storytellers, to have their say.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Esthetics," A Modern Book of Esthetics, ed. Melvin Rader (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1973), p. 518.

[2]Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 192.

[3]Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht on Theatre, translation and notes by John Willett (London: Methuen and Company Limited, 1964), p. 198.

Brecht's biographer, Frederic Ewen, defines Gestus as a "kind of quotation marking out clearly the particular social relationship of the character at a particular time toward another person or persons." (Frederic Ewen, Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art, and His Times [New York: The Citadel Press, 1967], p. 228).

John Willett states that "Gestus refers to the essential attitude which underlies any phrase or speech. . . . There is no single word by which Gestus can be translated. It is at once gesture and gist, attitude and point; one aspect of the relations between two people studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed." (John Willett, The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht [London: Methuen and Company Limited, 1964], p. 175).

[4]Bertolt Brecht, "On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre," Brecht on Theatre, p. 86.

[5]Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," p. 200.

[6]Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," p. 195.

[7]Bertolt Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect," Brecht on Theatre, p. 137.

[8]Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," pp. 193-194.

[9]Bertolt Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting," p. 139.

[10]Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre," p. 190.